

7_1_26 Talk*

*This is an automatically generated transcript, so there are errors.

Rick Hanson: [00:00:00] That meditation that we did is one of my favorites. And if you do things with other people, it can be a very simple point of entry that can also be quite profound. And it goes to larger questions about different ways to meditate. The simplest form of meditation is to let everything increasingly fall away so that you're simply being with whatever's arising. Now to be able to sustain that can be challenging, especially in the beginning, so that we don't get carried along by this stream of consciousness. That's the simplest form of meditation, just sitting, just being. Just here, just now. Fantastic form of meditation. There is also a whole collection of meditative practices in Buddhism and in other traditions that are... Cultivation practices. We are using meditation to cultivate certain beneficial factors in consciousness and we are also, through those cultivation processes, developing them increasingly as traits that we carry with us wherever we go. Now in the process of cultivation, it can be challenging to start to experience something. And it may be that it's just not your day. Or your horoscope sign, I don't know, the moon is an Aquarius, it's just not working for you, or something like that. No worries.

[00:01:36] On the other hand, if it's difficult to gradually open into a normal range wholesome experience, like feeling cared about by other people, well, that... Is a clue that it could be useful to explore that and find ways to help yourself rest in it increasingly. Now, being cared about by other people and beings, including your dog or cat, is the most challenging of those three types of breath because to some extent it depends on other people. And if you recall Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, Hell? Is other people. So other people disappoint, they're beyond our control fundamentally. We can't make them always be and do and say the things we want and they should do and be and say. That is true. And it's also true that it's almost impossible to move through this life without encountering others who in some very basic ways include you, see you. Appreciate you, even like, and actually sometimes maybe, love you. And so opening to the fact of that and cultivating the sense of it is really valuable. And of course, doing those things outwardly that increase being included, seen, appreciated, liked, or loved. It's possible to imagine being appreciated, liked, or loved, being cared about. And just imagining it can be really wholesome and helpful. It's interesting that a therapy that's emerging is called ideal parenting psychotherapy, actually has a lot of benefits.

[00:03:33] So people are imagining a kind of parenting they never got, maybe, and yet, and they know they never get it, but deep down in the emotional centers of their brain, there's a soothing and a healing that's going on. So even if... The actual caring coming toward you in your life has been or in your is currently a really thin soup. Still, all is not lost and there are things you can do to open into this beautiful experience. And even most fundamentally, you can find a kind of caringness flowing in and flowing out that feels even transpersonal. That is an expression of the ways that The natural world is caring. We are inhaling the exhalations of green growing things. And, you know, without getting too woo-woo about it, but a little woo-woos I think pretty good. There could just be a sense of resting in the arms of reality, right? The bosom of mother nature in that broad and kind of fuzzy, but real sense, feeling cared about in those ways.

[00:04:42] So I want to use this now as a segue into the main portion of my talk tonight, which is about building on our exploration of positive emotions marked by the Buddha as major helpful factors in our healing, our growing, and our awakening. And I should say along the way that this focus is going to be on your own internal world. All right, there's a

place for that and also we are aided by Being skillful in our dealings with others. And so you might be interested in this program I've created having to do with the intersection the combination of lovingness and assertiveness You know, it's fairly straightforward to be assertive. It's fairly straight forward to be loving may not be easy But it's kind of straightforward but to combine them to bring them together in our dealings with challenging people and important relationships, you know, is no small thing. So you might have an interest in the material there as a compliment to what we're doing here.

[00:05:53] So I wanna talk now about the sweet power of three positive emotions, kindness, compassion, and happiness for others. These feelings, these states of being strengthen our relationships. They lift our spirits. They buffer against stress, tons of research on this, and they build resilience and even contribute to our lifespan. Whoa, how'd that happen? Along with equanimity, these three, kindness, compassion, and happiness for the welfare of others, are considered to be heavenly realms or divine abodes. It's interesting that the root of the word for these four, along with equanimity, Brahma Vihara in Pali. A key language of early Buddhism. And so Brahma is sort of a heavenly realm or so on. Vihara is a dwelling place, vihara. I love the word dwell. I particularly like that it has just one syllable. And where does your heart dwell? Where does your mind dwell? What dwells within you? Fundamental, simplifying, grounding consideration. Very embodied, right? And what's wonderful is that these... Qualities of being. Compassion, kindness, and happiness for others, along with equanimity, are available to us. We don't have to go to some heaven realm to experience them. We can experience them in daily life down here on planet Earth. Now, we can understand compassion, kindness and sometimes called altruistic joy, happiness at the welfare of others. We can understand these as moral virtues. They definitely are. There's a moral basis for having compassion and kindness and a sense of camaraderie with the well-being of others, the welfare of others. Yeah, they're moral virtues.

[00:07:53] And we can also understand them as experiential factors of your own personal healing, your own personal growing, and definitely your own person awakening. And this is the framework, this is approach, the perspective that I'm going to be taking here. Some experiences clearly contract us. Resentment is contracting. Envy. Contracting. Callousness and cruelty is contracting. Hatred is contracting Fearfulness, feeling threatened by others, is contracting You know there's a place for those feelings. They're understandable. They arise. They can guide us in useful directions if we draw upon them. Still they lead to suffering and harm for ourselves and others. Those experiences have collateral damage. They put us on the slippery slope of craving and clinging suffering and harming on the other hand Other experiences expand us and it's okay to draw these distinctions. Sometimes people say oh no You can't make a distinction. Well, why not the Buddha made all kinds of distinctions because there are distinctions.

[00:09:08] You know, there's distinctions between right the glass and the water inside it. There's a distinction between the location of a hot plate on which our hand is suddenly resting and being away from it. There's a place for that. There's place for having wise intentions, which is one of the elements of the Eightfold Path. So it's okay to draw these distinctions, and it's okay to recognize different qualities or factors in how you be and help yourself disengage from some and engage with others. That's the essence of wise effort. Which is an element of the Eightfold Path, to disengage from what is painful and harmful and to engage with what is enjoyable and helpful. It's okay. So you can recognize that when we're rested in compassion, kindness, and happiness at others, how does it feel, right? Is there a calming, a soothing in yourself? Is there spaciousness and openness? Is there a connecting with other people as you intensify these experiences of compassion,

kindness, and altruistic joy toward others? Do they cleanse you? Do they purify you? Do they actually sink down inside and heal places inside that have been hurting? Do they bring into you and fill up empty places inside that have been lacking? Yeah. Yeah.

[00:10:42] And as we rest in these dwelling places, we are resting fundamentally in qualities of the awakened heart. You know, we are taking the fruit of practice as a path of practice, as we wrest in compassion, kindness, and happiness for others. So let's explore them in detail. And I'm really quite happy to deal, to talk about and to address very concrete real world problems. So for example, Fran writes, how can I evoke loving kindness to myself and others while experiencing on a daily basis, having become the negative target of a nephew over something I am not involved in at all, involving his late mother? Exactly. So to be clear, first, there are times when we are so hijacked or so flooded, so invaded by experiences. Being shocked, or alarmed, or in great physical pain, or just overwhelmingly depressed, or grief-stricken, or sorrowful, or outraged at injustice. In those moments, it may be inaccessible to you to find compassion or kindness, or happiness at the welfare of others. It's just out of reach. Okay, if it's out of range, it's outta reach. There's no push here that you should reach for something that's phony. Thousand percent no, all right?

[00:12:22] And I think as Jamie points out, this is not about faking it till you make it. On the other hand, on the other end, when the noise settles down a little bit, when the volume comes back down a bit, when you start to find your footing again, certain experiences either naturally arise, like perhaps compassion for yourself. And then broadening maybe compassion for others who are innocent in the matter. And... Also, sometimes it becomes within reach that we can find, for example, compassion for others, even those who have wronged us. And we can fine, perhaps, certain basic good wishes toward others, frankly, if only to lead them to clean up their act. You know if they were happier, they wouldn't be treating us like that. Maybe, that's a motivation there. But there's nothing here that's about swerving away from what's useful and what I'm talking about due to edge case situations where what I am talking about is just out of reach. You know, there's a teaching from Larry Yang that I quote in my book, Neurodharma, that you can find in which he basically says, essentially in order, you know, I'd be loving toward all beings. If I can't be loving toward all beings, may I be loving towards some beings? If I cannot be loving to some beings, may I at least not harm beings? And if I cannot avoid harming beings, may I harm them as little as possible? You know, there's a place for that. That's contextual here. Okay?

[00:14:17] So let's talk about the first one of kindness. The word that's typically used for kindness and, you know, early Buddhism is Metta. Sometimes translated also as loving kindness. I'm going to stick with kindness because it's kind of a simple word, only has two syllables. And the root of the word for metta in Pali, the language of early Buddhism or a key language, is friend, friendliness. I can, you know, loving kindness sounds kind of lofty. Oh, how do I do that? You know, basic friendliness, you meet someone on the street, you there's a kind of simple. Civility, basic decency, and openness, you know, a stance of non-harming. I'm not here to hurt you. That's basic friendliness here. It's a basic, you, know, goodwill rather than ill will. Wishing well, wishing that others be happy, wishing others be safe, wishing other be at ease, wishing that others be healthy, a basic goodwill. And this goodwill does not require that we like them. You don't have to like someone to, you know, wish that they find a basic healthiness in this life.

[00:15:36] Sometimes I find that it's helpful to take, to bring to mind that other people have those that they care about, and to find that even if someone is really challenging to me, I can expand to be aware of those in their life that they're worried about, their children, and

their family, their friends. Et cetera. And to kind of wish that others in their life prosper and be at peace and be healthy and be well, you know, as part of my good wishes for that particular person. Typically in the training, the cultivation of these qualities, there's kind of a sequence in formal training you might be familiar with. We start by wishing well as we train. We're strengthening a muscle of kindness here. That's how we're. Starting easy, but we're increasing the weight as we train. We might start with someone that is a benefactor, someone who is a teacher or we respect, someone maybe that we feel a lot of appreciation for, someone that's really easy to wish well. You start there and we know what it's like to wish them well. We might use formal thoughts in our mind, like may you be safe, may you healthy. May you be happy, may you live with ease.

[00:17:02] Those are four traditional wishes of wishing well. And we can apply them first to a benefactor. We can also customize them to particular situations. May you get that promotion that you richly deserve. You know, may your daughter, you know, recover from that challenging illness. It's okay to be specific. And then we can extend these wishes and in our formal training and practice to let's say someone that is a friend. It's not so much that they're a benefactor, but we still like them. Maybe we love them. Could be a mate, could be a partner, could be dog, you know, it's friend. Maybe this is a friends who drives you crazy sometimes or a friend that, you deliberately don't get together with more than once a month. Once a month is plenty, but still. They're your friend. You wish them well. Then you can move to a neutral person. You can also do this with yourself. Sometimes people start with themselves. Sometimes they end with themselves because they got a warm up to wish themselves well. And scaled with increasing challenge, you can try out a difficult person. Someone that for you is difficult. Maybe they're not so difficult for some other people.

[00:18:29] So you might bring to mind, you know, someone who's mildly annoying, mildly challenging, or maybe someone you work with, maybe a neighbor down the street, maybe a person down the hall in your apartment building, and you try to find a way to wish them well. To, to, to may you be safe. I'm disagreeing with you politically and I wish you no harm. May you be saved from harm. I disagree with you about this or that or I'm still mad that you did this or that or said this or that, and may you be healthy. I don't wish illness upon you, may you, be healthy, right? You're exploring that and you're seeing what it's like to do this practice and you are stretching yourself as you go. All right. And then. You know, I find people say, well, what about... And they fill in the blank. You know the worst possible person in the history of the world. What about them? Well, what them? Why are you even bringing them up? They're out of reach. And there are plenty of others who could be, you know, challenging for you that are actually within your reach. Why not go out for them? Right? We're basically recognizing that others are beings too. We're bringing into our field of awareness. The being behind their eyes, right? We're not standing with those who are callous and indifferent. We're doing that. We're now doing that morally, and in particular, my focus here, we're not doing that because operating in that way hurts your own heart. It pinches and contracts and turns your own hearts sour. We don't want to do that. So what about a person?

[00:20:16] So it's interesting that what abouts are really good. So here we have Mary's. What about a personal who lives below me and even though it's a non-smoking complex, he continues to pour smoke into my apartment while harming me? I want to say first, if you don't want to wish him well, don't wish him. Period. Find others to practice on. Find others that are within reach for you to strengthen yourself. I, you know, in my advanced age, do a certain amount of weight training finally. And I don't try to lift weights that are too heavy. You know, I wanna lift weights that are in range for me. And it's through lifting them and

with repetition that I strengthen that. Still, you might imagine that this person below you, is doing something that's really bad, they're breaking rules, it's unjust, okay? And you might compartmentalize that, the smoking they're doing.

[00:21:18] One of the great freedoms is to be able to compartmentalize aspects of other people while retaining your own autonomy and agency and freedom in how you relate to other aspects of them. Maybe, you know, they're smoking, they are smoking, okay, and you might know that they like walking their dog. May you enjoy walking your dog. You might know they have had loved ones dying sometime in the past years and they're living alone and all that, you now. May you not be so lonely. May you find the company and companionship of others. You know, sometimes we can do forms of kindness in which we're kind of deliberately going underneath some of the bad behavior in others. This is the yellow flag, but if it works for you, it might work for you. You might just wish, you know, may you be drawn toward healthiness. May you be drawn toward health in such a way that pulls you away from smoking.

[00:22:31] Okay, now I want to move on to compassion and I want say first though there are people in our life that Understandably, we resize the relationship we can really wish them. Well on the other side of the world You know, I'm happy. I wish you well while never wanting to see you ever again Okay, you know And sometimes you have to really establish a sense of boundary or distance. You have to get them out of your head where they're living rent-free to be able to wish them well. Autonomy supports intimacy. You know, separating supports joining. Okay. So, compassion. Compassion is a combination of three things. Empathy, benevolence, and the motivation to relieve suffering. The word for it in Pali, and I think maybe Sanskrit as well, is Karuna. Karuna, compassion, so we have empathy for suffering. Kindness is not grounded in suffering. There's not a presumption of suffering. In compassion, there's a presumptive of suffering... Different. We have empathy for the suffering, but we're not just indifferent, nor does our empathy lead us to be cruel or to manipulate or dominate other people cleverly with our empathy. No, our empathy moves us into caring. It is sweet. There's the sweetness of caring along with the bitterness of empathy, and that caring moves us motivationally. And that's how the biology of compassion evolved actually. In the caring system initially between mothers and their children and less complex primates and even less complex other mammals. You know there's that motivational aspect but often we can't do anything to change their suffering but the caring is still valid even if the motivation to help isn't particularly relevant there.

[00:24:42] So since compassion is bittersweet, it's important to stay focused on the sweet of the caring, in part because that enables us to sustain the empathic openness to and the feeling with and the roots of the word for compassion, compatio, to suffer with. To be able to sustain that suffering with, we need to keep refueling ourselves and feeding and protecting ourselves. With the sweetness of the lovingness, the sweetness, of the caring. There's research on empathy fatigue. People do burn out with empathy, but there's also research that shows that compassion fatigue is not really a thing and that in the lovingness of the carrying-ness of compassion, there's a release of various chemicals in your brain, including natural opioids, that buffer us against the distress we feel. Through empathy for suffering. We can also extend compassion to the upstream systemic sources of suffering. And that's very much my work these days, by the way, and you may know about it in the Global Compassion Coalition. So much of our suffering downstream is due to upstream forces.

[00:25:57] And I think that while it's noble to be helping people downstream, and that's been my career for over 50 years, Increasingly, we ask ourselves, hey, what's pushing all

those people into the river of suffering upstream? And we can join with others, mobilizing around compassion to address those upstream sources of suffering that are systemic, such as poverty, injustice, bias, corruption, wealth inequality, war, and other systemic forces. Beautiful. And... We can balance the compassion that recognizes sources of sorrow with the gladness and gratitude that recognize sources of contentment and joy. And there's a story I heard on a retreat with Kamala Masters some years ago, and I put this story in my book, *Buddhist Brain*. Kamala, a very deep teacher, was with her teacher Menindra, kind of a saintly figure. She was in India on the River Ganges. I think in the city Varanasi where I was able to go and visit some years ago, quite an extraordinary place, and as she was in a small boat with her teacher going down the river at dawn, she saw on one side of the river these beautiful ancient towers of the city that just gladdened her heart with their magnificence. All right?

[00:27:32] And on the other side of the river, she saw the funeral pyres of burning bodies and could hear the wailing and sorrow of, you know, their loved ones, both. And she talked about needing to have a heart that was both large enough to include the sorrow and also large enough to include gladness and beauty and joy, both together, both hands. And we can certainly cultivate that through these practices here. And then we have the third positive emotion or state of being, like to explore happiness for others. In Pali, this is *mudita*. Apparently the Dalai Lama once said that if you can be happy that others are happy, you can always be happy because there is always someone somewhere who is happy. I think that's really lovely. *Mudita* is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. So we're resonating sympathetically with the joy of others. It's also sometimes translated as altruistic joy. That's a selfless happiness at the fruits of life for others. You know, very often other people are having a good day or they've had a recent win or success, they've accomplished something or, you know, something they worried about has gotten better, you know, and we're kind of, eh, shrugged. We're indifferent to it, or even more, we're kind of annoyed by it, we're envious about it. *Mudita* is really undermines comparing mind. Comparisons are sometimes called the thief of joy. When we have that kind of comparing to others, you know, *Mudita* takes us out of that, and we're just being with them, and what's true for them, in its own right. Not comparing it to, you know what's missing in our own life. *Mudita* is a great antidote to envy, you know.

[00:29:49] I recall a time when I was on retreat, also a different retreat, and I was triggered. I was plugged in with resentment and envy for someone who, and this kind of fits into my object relations from childhood, you know, my way of relating to my peer groups as I was a young dorky shy. Kid going through school feeling like an outsider, both, you know, wanting to be taken up by the cool kids and also having a certain amount of contempt toward them. What a combination. Not so good. Anyway, there I was on retreat as one is sometimes on retreat, kind of all this stuff arising because your mind's quiet enough for it to bubble up. And I was full of envy towards someone who... Was having a lot of success and I thought, you know, a fair piece of that is just not deserved. Why don't I have that kind of success? I deserve that kind success. And I just tipped into, repeating in my mind these phrases toward this person. May you have all the success that I lack. Ooh. It was a kind of a version of *Tonglen* in a sense from Tibetan Buddhism, kind of, a version in which I was just wishing that this person get forms of success that were just not yet coming my way. And I noticed that in doing that, I felt such a release, such a letting go of mega suffering that I was experiencing around that envy.

[00:31:30] So you might imagine for yourself, If you're caught up in comparing mind, if you're called up in envy, just see if you can deliberately shift and do more of a sense of happiness for the welfare of others. You know, you can imagine a family in which everyone

rejoices in each other's success and the rivalries between siblings or sometimes, you know, between others in a family systems just fade away and people are really rejoicing in each other's successes. Whoa Imagine workplaces where people are celebrating and happy for the successes of others You know, you know the words imagine competitions. We're watching the World Cup these days around soccer or football and Yeah, we can Wish that we had won And we can feel a gladness in the joyfulness and the celebration and the impact in the countries the team that beat us. That's possible. Imagine the freedom in that, you know, we're being real about how we feel. There's some loss, maybe some grief. Oh, if only something or other, if the referee had seen that, oh, okay.

[00:32:52] And alongside that, we can have our heart lifted by gladness for the sake of others, right? Imagine nations in which we can be glad at the good fortune of others and glad that people coming to our country have found safe haven instead of being pinched and contracted and seeing them as a threat when in fact, they lift up our communities. Imagine that. Imagine a world in which we regard each person's flourishing as our own gain. So, you know, we can understand that supporting the flourishing of others is beneficial for oneself. You know, instead of happiness being some kind of scarce resource that we, you now, compete over, happiness can be contagious, right? Someone else's happiness does not reduce our own happiness. In fact, with Mudita, it increases it, right? Your joy becomes my joy. And now they're two happy people instead of just one. A key point is that a lot of research shows that we can increase, we can cultivate these as traits. We start with states of kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. We start those as experiences, and then through positive neuroplasticity. We take them in. We internalize them. We marinate in them. We keep those neurons firing together that underlie, you know, Metta, Corona, and Mudita, so that gradually they leave lasting physical traces behind in our nervous system, changing structure and function there.

[00:34:38] And so increasingly a person actually has a growing field in which they are resting in compassion, kindness, and altruism. Toward others. And with time, they expand that field to include more and more challenging people so that more and this is really important, it's kind of like they're a human, their heart is like a Wi-Fi station that's radiating. And you can feel this around saintly beings in history and in the present time. They're just simply radiating a field of good wishes and lovingness that others move through. And the radiating, the rippling outward, the expressing, the spreading of that field of the heart is not dependent on what others are. Particular forms of behavior, like doing business with certain people or continuing to sleep with certain people or include other people, you know, in their holiday gatherings. That may change, that may change. But the unconditional lovingness, radiating outwardly, is not contingent. On what's happening in the outer world. And that is a beautiful, beautiful freedom that gradually liberates the mind.

[00:35:53] There's a teaching in early Buddhism that boundless loving kindness, boundless without bounds, without limits, boundless, loving kindness and the cultivation of boundless loving kindness undoes the fetters, the chains, the shackles that bind us to a contracted ego. And liberate the heart. And increasingly, these three qualities become less and less, something you have to deliberately practice, and they become more and more someone that you are. And I want to make a point here too, it's normal that, for example, when we get in touch with these positive social emotions, compassion, kindness, and mudita, it's normally that other things arise, like, wow, I wish others were compassionate toward me. Or, wow, you know, it seems so unfair for me to be kind, but others are not very kind. It's understandable. Or when you see another person being healthy while you grapple with a chronic illness, it's understandable that other things arise. And like I said earlier, one of the fundamental freedoms involves compartmentalization, in a sense. Or

just drawing distinctions, disentangling. There's a lot of language in Buddhism about disentangling. You know, the knotted fabric of the mind, so that threads live in their own right. There can be a thread over here in which, yeah, I'm sad and mad that I'm dealing with this health condition, and being aware of their vibrant health is pissing me off, you know? Okay, that's over here.

[00:37:37] And meanwhile, over here, independent of all that's there, can you be glad that they're healthy? At least somebody is healthy on this earth. Even if I'm not, you know, very important. Yeah, Uli raises a question, is depending on others happiness for your own happiness? I think, you know, is that co-dependence? Depends how far you depend on them. You know, it's understandable that we are dependent on other beings. We're affected by them. And if their happiness is a factor of our happiness, that's really understandable. If they're depressed and unhappy, that's gonna affect you too. And what I was saying earlier about the freedom of differentiation. You know, so that we're not so tightly coupled to various things going through our mind. We can preserve certain beneficial and wholesome states of being that we are centered in and rusting our attention in, even if other things are moving around the periphery of awareness. In much the same way, we can be aware in our life of other people. They're mad or sad or loud or quiet, whatever. All right, but increasingly our own core of well-being. The fundamental core of our own inner peace and contentment and love is unshakable through the gradual cultivation of these factors that we've been exploring here. We're not indifferent or selfish to others as we grow that unshakability core of resilient well-being. In fact, that unshakeable core of a billion well-being, enables us to be... Increasingly generous and large-hearted, patient, mild, forgiving and forbearing, gracious, helpful with other people.

[00:39:37] So how about we just take a last minute or so? To just let the thoughts, I've offered a lot of thoughts and let them settle. You come back to that sense of your own heart. One of the important points about the cultivation of heart qualities is that a lot of that cultivation involves a kind of uncovering of the innate goodness that's already within you. So finding your way home here to that innate goodness, that inherent good intentions toward others, even if not perfectly fulfilled. You would rather that others be healthy than sick. You'd rather that others be happy rather than miserable. You'd rather that others be free of pain, rather than burdened by it. That's who you are. That's natural. A lovely practice of meditation is to rest in your naturally good heart. To find it, feel it, rest in it. And in the resting, in your natural good heart, Those qualities become strengthened in you, more and more, they're your home base. It's where you come from.